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AUTHOR Buri, John R.
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ABSTRACT

In the recent past there has been a growing interest in the investigation of the self. A primary area of investigation has revolved around the question of the stability of the self-concept. This study investigated parental nurturance as a stable predictor of self-esteem across adolescent and young adult age groups. Subjects (N=784) were students from seven distinct age groups: seventh graders; eighth graders; high school sophomores; high school seniors; undergraduate freshmen; and undergraduate upperclassmen. Results revealed that even though parental nurturance was more strongly related to self-esteem during junior high school years than during the high school and college years, parental nurturance still remained a robust predictor of self-esteem during these latter years. Strong nurturant relationships with one's mother and one's father provide stable bases for global self-esteem throughout the early adolescent to early adulthood years. This is a time during which many individuals experience considerable change and discontinuity in their lives and are therefore in need of a relational context in which they can find stability, reassurance, and the support of caring relationships. When such a context is available, then the individual is better able to cope with the stress of change and more able to tolerate areas of discontinuity within his or her life. (CM)

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Stability of Parental Nurturance as a
Salient Predictor of Self-Esteem

John R. Buri

University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, MN

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be sent to Dr. John R. Buri, De-
partment of Psychology, Mail #4026, University of St. Thomas, 2115 Summit Ave.,
St. Paul, MN, 55105.

Running Head: FAMILIAL BASES OF SELF-ESTEEM

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Abstract

The relationship of parental nurturance to self-esteem for seven distinct adolescent and early-adulthood age groups ($N = 784$) was investigated. Results revealed that even though parental nurturance was more strongly related to self-esteem during the junior high school years ($R^2 > 50\%$) than during the high school and college years (R^2 values between .338 and .390), parental nurturance still remains a robust predictor of self-esteem during these latter years. These results were discussed within the context of: (a) the stability at different ages of the bases upon which one's judgments of self-esteem are made, and (b) parental nurturance as a stabilizing influence during the transitional years of adolescence and early adulthood.

In the recent past there has been a growing interest in the investigation of the self. A primary area of investigation has revolved around the question of the stability of the self-concept. Several theorists (e.g., Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Markus, 1977; Mortimer & Lorence, 1981; Swann, 1985; Swann & Hill, 1982; Tesser & Campbell, 1983) have argued that one's view of self consists of core self-schema which remain stable over time largely through a process whereby information inconsistent with these self-schema is cognitively resisted. With regard to the dominant evaluative dimension of the self (i.e., self-esteem), empirical evidence has indicated a high degree of stability, both over shorter as well as longer chronological periods of time (e.g., Carlson, 1965; Dusek & Flaherty, 1981; McCarthy & Hoge, 1982; Mortimer, Finch, & Kumka, 1982; O'Malley & Bachman, 1983; Wylie, 1979).

This brief sampling of studies is representative of the overriding focus found in the investigation of the stability of the self --- does one's view of his or her self change considerably over time or do we find that the self is highly stable across chronological periods? While this is obviously a valuable area of investigation into the self, viewing the stability of the self-concept exclusively in these ways is limited. As Blyth and Traeger (1983) pointed out, an equally important (although overlooked) research perspective in this area concerns the stability of one's bases for self judgments. In other words, to what extent are primary sources of information about the self consistently employed by individuals over time as they make their self judgments?

In the present study, the dimension of the self under investigation was global self-esteem. Numerous researchers have reported a strong direct relationship between parental nurturance and global self-esteem at several different

age levels (e.g., Bachman, 1982; Buri, Kirchner, & Walsh, 1987; Coopersmith, 1967; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Peterson, Southworth, & Peters, 1983; Rohner, 1986; Rosenberg, 1979; Sears, 1970). Absent in these investigations of the relationship between parental nurturance and self-esteem, however, has been a consideration of nurturance as a basis for the "reflected appraisals" (Rosenberg, 1979) of self-esteem across various ages. In other words, is parental nurturance a stable predictor of self-esteem regardless of age or does the predictive salience of parental nurturance vary with changes in chronological age? In the present study, several adolescent and young adult age groups were sampled with the purpose of investigating parental nurturance as a stable predictor of self-esteem across these ages.

Method

Subjects

Data were collected from seven distinct adolescent and young adult age groups: (a) 7th graders sampled from four schools ($n = 111$, mean age = 12.2 yrs.), (b) 8th graders from the same four schools as the 7th graders ($n = 109$, mean age = 14.0 yrs.), (c) sophomores sampled from one high school ($n = 90$, mean age = 15.6 yrs.), (d) seniors from three high schools ($n = 109$, mean age = 17.6 yrs.), (e) undergraduate freshmen, each of whom was still living at home with their parents ($n = 127$, mean age = 18.4 yrs.), (f) undergraduate freshmen, each of whom was no longer residing with the parents ($n = 129$, mean age = 18.4 yrs.), and (g) undergraduate upperclassmen, each of whom was no longer living at home with the parents ($n = 109$, mean age = 20.6 yrs.).

[Note that the all of the undergraduate participants were sampled from one university.]

The participants in each sample lived in a large metropolitan area in the northern Midwest, were predominantly from middle-class and upper-class backgrounds, and were white. The responses of those participants in each sample who were from families in which one of the parents had died or the parents were divorced or separated were excluded from the present analyses; thus each participant was from an intact family arrangement.

Materials and Procedure

Each participant was asked to complete three questionnaires and one demographic information sheet. The order in which these forms were presented was randomized. Each of the participants was told that this was a study of family factors that may influence the development of self-esteem. They were instructed not to take too much time on any one questionnaire item, but rather, to give their first reaction to each statement. They were also encouraged not to look for the "right" answer or the "best" answer to each item, but to respond to each statement as honestly as possible.

Self-esteem. Each of the participants was asked to complete the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965). The Total Positive self-esteem score was computed for each participant. The higher the score on this scale, the higher an individual's self-esteem.

Parental nurturance. Buri, Misukanis, and Mueller (1988) reported on the Parental Nurturance Scale, a 24-item Likert-type scale used to measure parental nurturance from the point of view of an individual evaluating the nurturance he or she received from his or her parents. Two forms of this scale were presented, one to measure the appraised nurturance of the mother and one to measure the appraised nurturance of the father. The test-retest reliabilities ($n = 85$) and

Cronbach (1951) coefficient alpha values ($n = 156$) for these scales were, respectively: .92 and .95 for the Mother's Nurturance Scale, and .94 and .93 for the Father's Nurturance Scale. Examples of items from the Mother's Nurturance Scale are: "My mother seldom says nice things about me," "My mother is often critical of me and nothing I ever do seems to please her," and "My mother enjoys spending time with me."

Demographic information. In addition to completing the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, the Mother's Nurturance Scale, and the Father's Nurturance Scale, the participants also provided information concerning: (a) their gender, (b) their age, (c) whether one of their parents had died, and (d) whether their parents were divorced or separated.

Results

The bivariate correlations of mother's and father's nurturance with self-esteem are presented in Table 1. Clearly both mother's and father's nurturance are strongly related to self-esteem for each sample of participants.

Insert Table 1 about here

In contrasting the correlation between mother's nurturance and self-esteem with that of father's nurturance and self-esteem, the correlation coefficients presented in Table 1 indicate that in every case but one (i.e., the sample of undergraduate freshmen who were still residing at home with their parents), mother's nurturance more strongly predicted self-esteem than did father's nurturance; however, t -tests for the comparison of two correlations computed on the same sample (Ferguson, 1966) revealed that none of these differences between the bivariate correlations of mother's nurturance with self-esteem

Table 1

Bivariate Correlations for Mother's and Father's Nurturance with Self-Esteem and R^2 Values When Regressing Self-Esteem on Mother's and Father's Nurturance for Seven Samples

	r	R^2
7th Graders ($n = 111$)		
Mother's Nurturance	.669**	.507**
Father's Nurturance	.585**	
8th Graders ($n = 109$)		
Mother's Nurturance	.686**	.556**
Father's Nurturance	.623**	
High School Sophomores ($n = 90$)		
Mother's Nurturance	.508**	.338**
Father's Nurturance	.492**	
High School Seniors ($n = 109$)		
Mother's Nurturance	.537**	.380**
Father's Nurturance	.524**	
College Freshmen At Home ($n = 127$)		
Mother's Nurturance	.525**	.390**
Father's Nurturance	.578**	
College Freshmen Away From Home ($n = 129$)		
Mother's Nurturance	.547**	.359**
Father's Nurturance	.508**	
College Seniors Away From Home ($n = 109$)		
Mother's Nurturance	.550**	.340**
Father's Nurturance	.441**	

Note: ** $p < .00005$

and father's nurturance with self-esteem were significant.

Also presented in Table 1 are the R^2 values derived by regressing self-esteem on mother's and father's nurturance. These R^2 values were greater than 50% for each of the junior high school samples, whereas each of the high school and college samples yielded R^2 values between .338 and .390.

Discussion

Since the introduction of the concept of the "social self" (James, 1890) into the psychological literature, few psychologists have denied the critical importance of social interactions in the development and definition of the self. Furthered by Cooley's (1902) "looking glass self" and Mead's (1934) more formalized discussion of symbolic interactionism, social psychologists have come to view social interactions as prominent in the process of apprehending and assuming specific characteristics about one's self.

In the investigation of global self-esteem, interactions with one's parents have been particularly implicated in this process. Consistently parents' nurturance, acceptance, affection, support, and attention have been found to positively relate to their children's self-esteem. Clearly the present results support such a conclusion --- a strong relation between parental nurturance and self-esteem was obtained in each of the seven samples studied. The present results, however, also offer evidence as to the stability of mother's and father's nurturance as bases for self-esteem across various adolescent and early adult age groups. The findings in the present study suggest that: (a) parental nurturance is more strongly related to self-esteem during the junior high school years than during the high school or college years, (b) even though the relationship between parental nurturance and self-

esteem is consistently weaker in the high school and college samples than in the junior high samples, parental nurturance is still a robust predictor of self-esteem after the junior high school years, and (c) even after children have moved away from home to college, parental nurturance is important to self-esteem.

Strong nurturant relationships with one's mother and one's father provide stable bases for global self-esteem throughout the early-adolescent to early-adulthood years. This is a time during which many individuals experience considerable change and discontinuity in their lives and are therefore in need of a relational context in which they can find stability, reassurance, and the support of caring relationships. When such a context is available, then an individual is better able to cope with the stress of change, more able to tolerate areas of discontinuity within his or her life, and more readily able to say in the midst of this change and discontinuity, "I am a worthwhile human being." The conspicuous stability of the relation between parental nurturance and self-esteem (both within the junior high school samples as well as within the high school and college samples) in the present study offer strong evidence that nurturant relationships with one's parents provide an important "arena of comfort" (Simmons, 1988) which may absorb many of the transitional difficulties during the adolescent and early adulthood years.

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